

Contacting Program Officers Points for Consideration

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Colleague: *"You should contact the Program Officer (PO)."*

Me: *"I can't contact the Program Officer! It's too intimidating. What if I say something stupid? What if I make him/her mad, then my proposal won't get funded. The PO doesn't have time for me. I'm not ready. I don't have my research plan completed. What can the PO tell me that I don't already know?..."*

Sound familiar? These thoughts went through my head the first time (first couple times really) I had to contact a Program Officer. But, the more POs I talked to, the more I realized how helpful they were. I have learned things about the program I was applying to or about my proposed research that I would not have known otherwise. Most of my funding comes from federal, state or industrial sources, and so based on personal experiences, suggestions from colleagues, and feedback provided by Program Officers I have come to know, I have tried to provide some helpful tips for talking to a Program Officer.

Why contact the PO?

- With some agencies, the PO makes funding decisions, and with other agencies, the PO serves as a facilitator. Regardless of their role within the agency, the PO can provide insight into the agency's goals, the proposal review process, and your proposed project's suitability for the funding program, i.e., help identify the correct program or study section. Please do not expect the PO to answer questions that are easily addressed in the RFP. This is a waste of the PO's time and will not leave him/her with a positive impression.
- Some POs can advocate for you should questions arise during the review process.
- POs can help assess the amount or type of preliminary data needed for the funding program. They can also answer questions about the appropriateness of matching funds, infrastructure availability, student programs, outcomes, etc.
- You can get valuable information about your proposal. This is true pre- and post-proposal submission, e.g., why it was not funded and how you can change it for future submissions.
- I was once told by a PO that it is always easier to fund a "known" entity. If you have contact with a PO, you are less of an unknown.

Before contacting the PO

- I try to know the PO's area of expertise. A quick look at his or her CV or research record allows me to better communicate my ideas. For example, if the PO has extensive molecular biology experience, then I do not need to go into great detail in explaining the molecular methods I will use in my research (unless the methods are truly novel). I can instead spend the time addressing the aspects of my research the PO may not be familiar with. If the PO makes funding decisions, I may be able to tailor aspects of my proposal to also address the PO's interests.

- I read the directions for the RFP (request for proposals) and know the funding agency's objectives, deadlines, proposal format, required materials, etc.
- Most funding agencies list past awardees. I look at these. Common themes in the type(s) of research funded have helped me formulate my proposed project.
- I try to have my proposal fairly clearly thought out, not necessarily written but far enough along that I know what I am going to do, how I am going to do it, and what I expect to see from doing it. I also have my research objectives written. I want to be able to confidently converse about my proposed research. I have also had POs ask questions about needed resources, level of student involvement, and expected outcomes.
- I try to treat the PO with the same respect and consideration I would like to receive from my colleagues. I think about how I can be most respectful of their time and efforts. For example, I try not to contact the PO within a week of the proposal due date, as it shows lack of preparation on my part and is when the PO is very busy fielding other last minute requests from potential grantees.

Contacting the PO

Email

- From my experience, most POs prefer initial contact be made via email. Email provides the PO time to think about your request, find information, and fit your request into their schedule. I have found most POs respond to emails within a week of receipt (often within a day or two). If I do not get a response within 1-1.5 weeks, I send a follow-up email. If still no response, I leave it and see if I can get my question answered another way (e.g., through contacting a previous grantee).
- Be prepared for an email exchange as POs can travel a lot and email provides them flexibility in getting back to you. However, do not abuse email, as it is very easy to send off an email asking a question that you could have, with a bit more effort, figured out yourself.

In person

- I try to meet with the PO when I can; however, I plan the meeting and send some introductory materials, e.g., project summary, well in advance. For example, if I know a PO will be at a conference I'm attending, I try to email him/her prior to set up an introduction. Many POs are happy to grab a cup of coffee with you if it is something they have planned for in advance.
- When possible, go to the PO or if you know the PO will be in your area, e.g., for another meeting, invite the PO to meet with you. I have done both, and both have worked out well. In either case, I have a short Powerpoint presentation ready summarizing my work and my proposed project (e.g., 5-10 min.). If a Powerpoint opportunity does not come up, I have the same presentation ready in a handout or summary sheet. In either case, I establish the length of our meeting in advance, e.g., usually 30 min. but often no more than 1 hour (I leave it up to the PO to decide the length of time), and then I clearly state the purpose of the meeting, e.g., to show the PO our facilities and introduce the PO to our research program.
- I try not to "cold approach" a PO at a conference or meeting. A federal PO I have come to know once told me that "cold approaches" are uncomfortable and inefficient as she is approached by so many researchers at a given meeting that she often

cannot remember one from the other. I have seen a line of researchers literally follow a PO around at a conference constantly vying for his attention!

- If I have to use a “cold approach”, I have a 1 page summary and introduction prepared. I include proposed research objectives, general methods, and how my research will further the funding agency’s goals. I include my name, affiliation and contact information on the summary as well as on a business card, both of which are given to the PO following my brief greeting. I then follow-up the meeting with a brief “thank you for your time” email to remind the PO of our meeting and to provide an opportunity for follow-up items.

Phone

- If I call the PO, my first call is nothing more than to set up another time to have a longer phone conversation. Unless otherwise directed by the PO, I may be calling as the PO is leaving for a meeting, in the middle of meeting a deadline, etc., so I try to be respectful and offer to set up a time for another phone call.

What to say (or not say) to the PO

- I first make a list of specific questions I have prior to contacting the PO. You will come across as confident and organized, and what you say or write to the PO will depend in part on what you need to know.
- When possible, I try to include how my project will address funding agency objectives. And, I focus on the facts of my work and not the shortcomings of others’ work. I try to make the conversation positive with things like “My research will address the RFP’s objectives by...” or “My research will advance the field by providing...”. I try not to say things like “No one has done such and such and so I will be the first” or “Current methods are limited and do not advance the field because...” A fellow microbiologist colleague told me a story of how she was talking to a federal agency PO and in discussing her proposed research she commented that the cultural studies being used in studying microbial communities were outdated and uninformative due to limitation in the cultural methods. She did not realize that the PO was doing similar research and had published extensively using cultural studies. Oooops! She realized her mistake when she later came across some of the PO’s work in the literature. This is another good reason to know the PO’s area of expertise.
- If I am emailing the PO for the first time, I include a one paragraph summary (4-6 sentences) of my project, 1-2 sentences of self introduction, and then my question or questions succinctly stated, e.g., “I am inquiring as to the suitability of my proposed research for your program.” If I am calling the PO for the first time, I have a 1 min. summary of my project prepared, 1-2 sentences of self introduction, and then my question or questions.
- I’ve found most POs collegial and genuinely interested in my work. In response to my initial inquiry into a program to assess suitability for my proposed research project, I was asked to provide a longer, 1 page summary of the work. Upon providing the summary, I was told by the PO that my project did not meet the funding program’s needs; however, the PO complimented me on the research and offered to forward my summary to other POs at the agency to see if another program was suitable. A

few days later, I was contacted by the PO of another funding program at the same agency and was invited to submit a proposal.

- I do not bombard the PO with questions I should be able to answer by reading the RFP or by contacting the PO's administrative assistant.
- I do not focus on how much better my research is compared to others'. I have found that POs do not like negativity. I want to catch the PO's attention and show him/her how my work will further their program. I try to sell my project but not at the expense of putting others down.
- I do not send information that has not been requested, for example, a CV. My goal is to present my research idea first (then provide additional information if requested). That said, if my research requires a lot of specialized equipment or infrastructure that is already available, I do provide this information as it will help achieve the research goals within the allotted time period and so forth.

Follow-up with the PO

- I always send a thank you email following contact with the PO.
- In some cases, I have been able to establish a relationship with a PO by offering to be a reviewer for proposals. This provides a valuable opportunity to learn more about the funding program as well.

You got the grant. Do you still need to contact the PO?

- Yes. I ideally want an on-going, positive relationship with POs. In many cases they are colleagues, and they can provide insight into research and future funding opportunities.
- As part of establishing a relationship with a PO, get your grant reports done and follow through with all contractual obligations! For example, I was talking to one of my POs when she started discussing how getting interim and final reports from some researchers was like pulling teeth and the result was the researchers being put on the "black list" for future funding.

Take home messages

- POs are extremely valuable resources, as advocates, as facilitators, and as colleagues.
- POs are there to help (pre- and post-submission). They want to see you succeed in order to see their funding program succeed.
- POs are very busy but do not let this deter you from contacting them. Be professional and respectful of their time. Be direct and concise in your requests, and be positive in all your interactions.